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The bombing of the Springfjord

From STEPHEN BARBER
WASHINGTON.

AT seven o'clock on a brilliantly fine morning in June 1954, the British freighter Springfjord (3,500 tons) was lying off the Pacific coast of Guatemala, about to discharge her cargo of cotton into barges.

Suddenly a twin-boomed P 38 aircraft appeared and, without warning, dive-bombed the ship. The first bomb—a 500-pounder—landed on the deck a few feet from most of the crew but did not explode. Nor did the second. The third did. Miraculously, none of the crew was injured, but the ship was driven ashore and written off as a total loss.

To this day, not a penny of damages or compensation has been paid to the owners, the Springwell Shipping Company. All they have recovered is £180,000 from London underwriters for the loss of the hull, which was insured against war risk.

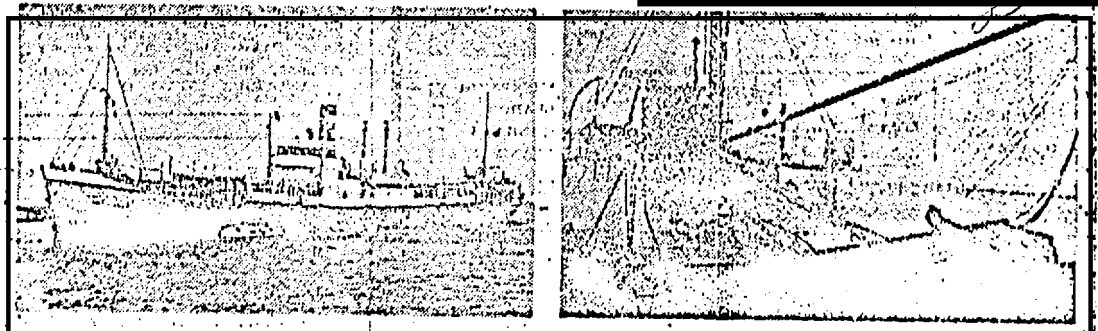
And yet the circumstances of the wholly unprovoked attack on this unarmed and innocent ship are well known. Questions have been asked in the House of Commons, diplomatic and other Government action promised—all to no avail.

For seven years the chairman of the Springwell Company, Capt. Peter Longton, struggled to obtain restitution. Then he gave up—until last year, when, in a series of articles published by *The Sunday Telegraph* about the American Central Intelligence Agency, he at last learnt why his ship had been wrecked.

The story behind the affair is this. In the early summer of 1954 it was decided in Washington that action must be taken to secure the overthrow of Guatemala's Left-wing President, Jacob Arbenz Guzman. There was reason to believe that arms from behind the Iron Curtain were on their way to the republic, and that plans were afoot to make it a full-fledged Communist state.

In view of the threat this posed to neighbouring Central American states, not to mention the Panama Canal, with all the strategic implications this posed to America's defence, the C.I.A. was assigned the task of ousting Arbenz. Full support was therefore given to an American-trained exile, Col. Carlos Castillo-Armaz, to stage a *coup d'état*.

An "instant airforce" of war-surplus fighter-bombers operating out of a base in El Salvador was duly furnished. American mercenaries flew these planes. One of them, Jerry da Larm, carried out raids on the capital, knocking out the Shell Company's oil storage depot outside the city. Another, Major Ferdinand Frederick Schupp, bombed the Springfjord.



As a whole, the *coup* was a success. Indeed American officials cite it as a highlight of the C.I.A.'s career.

Mr. Richard Bissell, then Director of Plans, who was later dismissed by President Kennedy after the Cuban invasion fiasco in 1963, openly admits this. Others have talked, too.

But the frankest account of the Springfjord raid was given by Señor Rudolfo Mendoza, a ring-leader in the Castillo-Armaz adventure, who flew as Major Schupp's wing-man on the fateful day. He is now Director of Aviation in Guatemala.

Said he in a tele-recorded interview, which was granted an American broadcasting company but has never, intriguingly enough, been shown:

"O.K. So we had this news at the base, that an English ship was approaching bringing some planes for the Government. There was three Spitfires and pilots in it.

"So we said: 'The best thing to do is sink the ship.'

"So we take on the ship with the P 38 with three bombs. One was a 1,000-pounder, two were 500s.

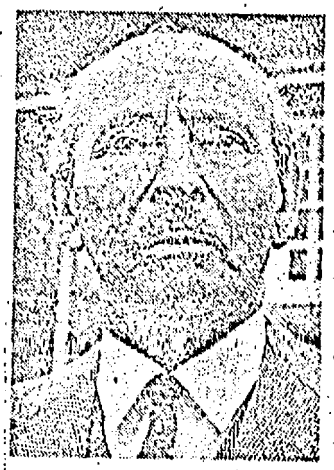
"Schupp, in the first dive he made at the ship, the bomb didn't explode but it made a big hole, it went right through. Same thing with the second bomb—went right through.

"Then I saw the crew—some got fast boats and got away. There was only one bomb left.

"Schupp dived in close to the ship and the bomb exploded . . . and blew some of the elevators off his airplane. . . ."

It turned out, of course, that the Springfjord was carrying no Spitfires. As a matter of fact, she was under time-charter to the American Grace Line and operating in the inter-American coastal trade for which she had been specially and expensively fitted out.

Shortly after the incident the Springwell company sent a British Q.C., Mr. Rafael Valls, to Guatemala City to discuss the case. Mr. Valls was cordially received by the President and invited to dinner at his palace. The next morning he was handed a letter at his hotel ordering him to quit Guatemala by that evening.



Above: Capt. Peter Longton, owner of the Springfjord. Top: the ship before and after the bombing.

Further efforts to obtain redress were no more successful. As Capt. Longton put it last week: "My associates and I were barking up the wrong tree. We tried to get restitution from the Guatemalans, but we should have been looking elsewhere."

As time went on, the amount in question grew. The claim—for loss of trading earnings, interest on the capital loss over 13 years, repatriation for the crew, insurance premiums, legal fees and the like, which was drawn up with the advice of the Board of Trade—all this amounted to over £1,100,000.

When, finally, Capt. Longton read *The Sunday Telegraph's* articles on the C.I.A., he immediately got in touch with Lamorte, Burns & Co., his firm's representatives in New York, asking them to look into the matter again. Lamorte, Burns wrote back to say that the law firm of Cichanowski & Callan had been in touch with the C.I.A. and the U.S. State Department in Washington, and were prepared to handle the claim on the basis of a 30 per cent. cut of the proceeds for themselves.

The idea of paying roughly a million dollars to an American firm to obtain restitution from the American Government did not greatly amuse Capt. Longton.

Last month he flew to Washington, where he learnt that the files on the case had been passed by Mr. Lawrence Houston, the General Counsel for the C.I.A., to the State Department. An appointment was arranged for him with Mr. Ernest Kerley, Assistant Legal Director, International Claims, at the State Department.

At this interview Capt. Longton told the American official that he did not wish to make an unseemly fuss or embarrass an ally, but that he did want the story looked into. He submitted a folio of his firm's claim.

Then, having heard nothing for three weeks, he sought a second meeting, which was granted. At this he was informed by Mr. Kerley that, while U.S. responsibility was not explicitly denied, he, Capt. Longton, would have to produce "affidavit proof" that the incident had taken place.

In the meantime, on Capt. Longton's behalf, I had questioned Richard Bissell, who is today working for the United Aircraft Company of East Hartford, Connecticut.

Mr. Bissell agreed that in a recent television interview he had referred to the Guatemalan coup, which had been under his operational control, but he hedged on the subject of the Springfjord.

"In the interview I referred to an incident that certainly went beyond the limits of established policy," he said. "I do not know I referred to the Springfjord. I think other people have connected the two up.

"As you probably know, she was sunk by a bomb from a Castillo-Armaz aircraft. I think